



Getting Started with Improv

2025 MTC/IL Retreat

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Why does Improv Matter?

In our ever-evolving world, where technology advances exponentially, we are certain of one thing - AI will change every area of life in ways we cannot imagine. As Neil says in his book, *Music on Mars*, "As we stand on the threshold of a new era, one in which the challenges we face will demand an unprecedented level of creativity and adaptability, I can't help but wonder: What role might music play in equipping us to meet those challenges head-on?"

"Current research...is giving us a new understanding of the enormous benefits that musicianship has to offer. But of even greater importance is to recognize that our ability to see, think, and act differently; our ability to exercise agility; our ability to change and grow are governed by our creativity capability. **And creative capability... has everything to do with neural connectivity. A more connected brain is a more creatively capable brain.**" p 54,55.

The Simply Music method includes the program, Comp and Improv. In my experience working with teachers over the past 20 years, many only dip their toe in and few are willing to immerse themselves in the uncertain waters of improvisation.

Whether the reluctance is from a childhood experience with a teacher who shunned improvisation or fear or judgment, we deprive ourselves AND our students when we refuse to learn and teach improvisation.

If you have been telling yourself you really should learn to improvise but never make progress, consider the science that supports the huge impact improvisation has on your brain - and the brains and futures of your students. To be clear, by not learning how to improvise (and improvising regularly), you are depriving yourself and your students of having a better, more connected brain.

Musical improvisation offers a wide range of benefits—cognitive, emotional, social, and musical. Below is a research-based summary of how improvisation supports growth in each of these areas.

Summary of Benefits

Benefit Area	Specific Benefit	Primary Source
Cognitive	Creativity, Executive Function	Beaty (2015), Pinho et al. (2014)
Emotional	Expression, Confidence	Biasutti & Frezza (2009), MacDonald et al. (2012)
Social	Communication, Belonging	Sawyer (2003), Aigen (2004)
Musical	Aural Skills, Theory Integration	Kratus (1994), Sarath (1996), Pressing (1988)

Detailed Descriptions

Enhances Creativity and Divergent Thinking

Improvisation activates brain areas associated with creative idea generation.

Source: Beaty, R. E. (2015). The neuroscience of musical improvisation. Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews.

Improves Executive Function

Improvisers exhibit improved planning, attention, and cognitive flexibility.

Source: Pinho, A. L. et al. (2014). Journal of Neuroscience.

Develops Auditory and Motor Integration

Improvisation trains real-time coordination between auditory and motor functions.

Source: Berkowitz, A. L., & Ansari, D. (2008). Neurolmage.

Promotes Emotional Expression and Regulation

Used in therapy to help process and express feelings through sound.

Source: MacDonald, R. et al. (2012). Music, Health, and Wellbeing.

Builds Confidence and Risk-Taking

Supports emotional resilience and willingness to take creative risks.

Source: Biasutti, M., & Frezza, L. (2009). Creativity Research Journal.

Enhances Communication and Collaboration

Group improvisation nurtures listening, adapting, and mutual understanding.

Source: Sawyer, R. K. (2003). Group creativity.

Fosters a Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

Inclusive musical experiences promote social bonding.

Source: Aigen, K. (2004). Music-centered music therapy.

Strengthens Aural Skills

Improvisers sharpen their ear for harmony, melody, and rhythm.

Source: Pressing, J. (1988). Generative processes in music.

Develops Real-Time Musical Thinking

Improvisation functions as spontaneous composition.

Source: Kratus, J. (1994). Journal of Research in Music Education.

Reinforces Theory and Technique

Helps internalize scales, chords, and musical structures.

Source: Sarath, E. (1996). Journal of Music Theory.

The Nuts & Bolts

Note: This session is based on and expands on the Simply Music Composition & Improvisation Program. It is an excerpt from the Music Teacher's Coach Improv & Comp 4-Week Workshop.

I. Improvisation & composition definitions

II. Setting up the environment

- Teacher (your attitude & mastery)

<https://www.quittingculture.com/music-teachers-coach-2025>

- Student (reservoir, owning music)
- Parents/Coaches (exploration as assignment)

III. Elements of success

- Trust
- Permission
- No judgment
- Willingness

Caveat: You have to create this for yourself first. Double check that each of these elements is in place for you, then for your students.

Your commitment:

To give yourself permission

To stop any judgment or negative self-talk

To be willing to explore for more than a few minutes

To be consistent with practice time

To clear the room if you need to

To look for things that prevent you from doing this (excuses of I'm too busy, I don't have to do this, other people are at home and will hear me so I'll do it later, I just don't want to)

The key to your success: Sit with each project. Commit to spending time each day you practice or prep for lessons. Establish a habit.

List of All Projects in order of challenge:

1. Pentatonic (play on black notes)
2. Take Dreams Come True* or Night Storm* and change positions
This can be done with any simple piece that you know
3. Take a piece you know and change the rhythm
4. Take a piece you know and play it "backwards"
5. Play the melody of a piece and change the left hand accompaniment
6. The "three-note" song (from Simply Music's Comp and Improv Program)
7. The "four-note" song

8. The "any-note" song
 9. Play a simple accompaniment, like Amazing Grace. Take those chords and change the order.
 10. Play those chords in a different way. Running, broken, rolling, etc.
 11. Think of all the chords you know. Play Amazing Grace chords in a different order and 4/4 rhythm.
 12. Learn the Blues Scale. Improvise the Blues Scale, one triangle at a time over Jackson Blues or another Blues piece you have.
 13. Get out the Accompaniment I book*. What types of chords do you know? Try playing different types of C, F and G chords. What do you like?
 14. The Four Chord song
 15. The New Four Chord song
 16. The Book Project
 17. The Movie Project
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